

What's next for venerable Maine art camp?

Following the death last year of founder Reg Grauert, Bearnstow's new leaders try to figure out how to make the Mount Vernon site sustainable going forward.

By BOB KEYES
Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — Time has changed a few things along the shoreline at Parker Pond over 75 years. But not much has changed at Bearnstow, an art and nature camp that opened in 1946 on the granite-rimmed pond at the headwaters of the west branch of the Forty Mile River in central Maine, taking over an existing but neglected hunting and fishing camp.

A New York dancer and lighting designer with a sense of adventure and a commitment to inclusion, Ruth "Reg" Grauert founded the camp the summer after World War II ended with her life partner, Frances Reid, on the principles of diversity and generosity and with an agenda that encouraged creativity and natural wonder. Grauert died last year at 101, which also happened to be the only summer Bearnstow was unable to host campers since it opened, because of the pandemic.

But Bearnstow, under new leadership, is back in business — and Grauert's spirit is very much present.

"I just got chills — thank you, Reg," said Bebe Miller, feeling what she took as Grauert's soft touch as she spoke of

her friend during a recent interview from the porch of the camp's dining hall. Both Grauert and Reid were laid to rest on camp grounds, with Grauert memorialized in late June, a year after her death, her burial site outlined with flower pots.

Miller, an internationally recognized choreographer,

began coming to Bearnstow as a young girl from Brooklyn in the 1950s and now, as board chairperson, is helping to lead the camp toward a sustainable future.

Grauert operated Bearnstow on guile, genius and passion, creating magic by assembling the right mix of people along a stunningly beautiful

setting on a small, quiet and pristine lake. It began as an overnight camp for kids, who learned about the trees and bugs and how to dance, sing, swim and ride horses. Over the years, the camp added adult components, primarily dance workshops and related activities, reflecting both Grauert's professional expertise and

a growing organic bond that developed between Bearnstow and the Bates Dance Festival in Lewiston.

With both founders deceased, Miller and her team are looking ahead to what comes next. After a work week of maintenance by volunteers, they welcomed young day-campers in early July, resuming the tradition of kids having fun with nature and art. But the question remains, what will the future be? Under Grauert's firm leadership, change came slowly to Bearnstow. She resisted trimming tree branches, let alone making substantial improvements to the buildings, to the point of neglecting necessary maintenance.

On the other hand, she danced with abandon at age 100 during the last summer she was at camp, in 2019.

With her passing, her friends are balancing the tradition of the past with the need for a sustainable future. That means tackling long overdue physical improvements, as well as changes to programming to encourage more adult users.

"We are moving past what we thought the camp would be with Reg," said Miller, who holds the most institutional knowledge of the place. "And

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Photo courtesy of Bearnstow Camp



Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer

ABOVE: Bebe Miller is the president of the board of directors of Bearnstow Camp and started coming to the camp when she was 6 years old. TOP: A photo of a dance class at Bearnstow Camp, date unknown, in an album of photographs of the camp's history.

ART REVIEW

Coastal art colonies captured in variety of styles at island museum

By JORGE S. ARANGO

To riff off an old adage, no artist is an island. Artists are impacted by their immediate surroundings, of course, but also by so much more.

Though Monhegan Island's seclusion and natural beauty has attracted artists since the late 19th century — perhaps most famously George Bellows, Robert Henri, Rockwell Kent and the Wyeths — many of those who painted here also traveled exten-



Courtesy of Monhegan Museum of Art & History

Paul Strisik, "Monhegan Pier," 1959, oil on canvas. Gift of Nancy Strisik.

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THEATER REVIEW

High-energy performance fitting for Shakespeare farce in the park

By STEVE FEENEY

After canceling a planned Deering Oaks park production of "Henry IV, Part 1" last summer because of the pandemic, the Fenix Theatre Company decided to hold off on resurrecting Henry, Falstaff and the gang for yet another year and has instead made its 2021 return with something a bit lighter, an early Shakespeare farce concerning the misadventures of two sets of identical twins. A cast of five takes on multiple



Hannah Cordes/Kat Moraros Photography

Kat Moraros and Michela Micalizio in "The Comedy of Errors."

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CAMP

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so, what is that relationship between what it was and my memory of how things were and where things are going? It's a vibrant conversation about finding our way – not solve it, but find our way through this."

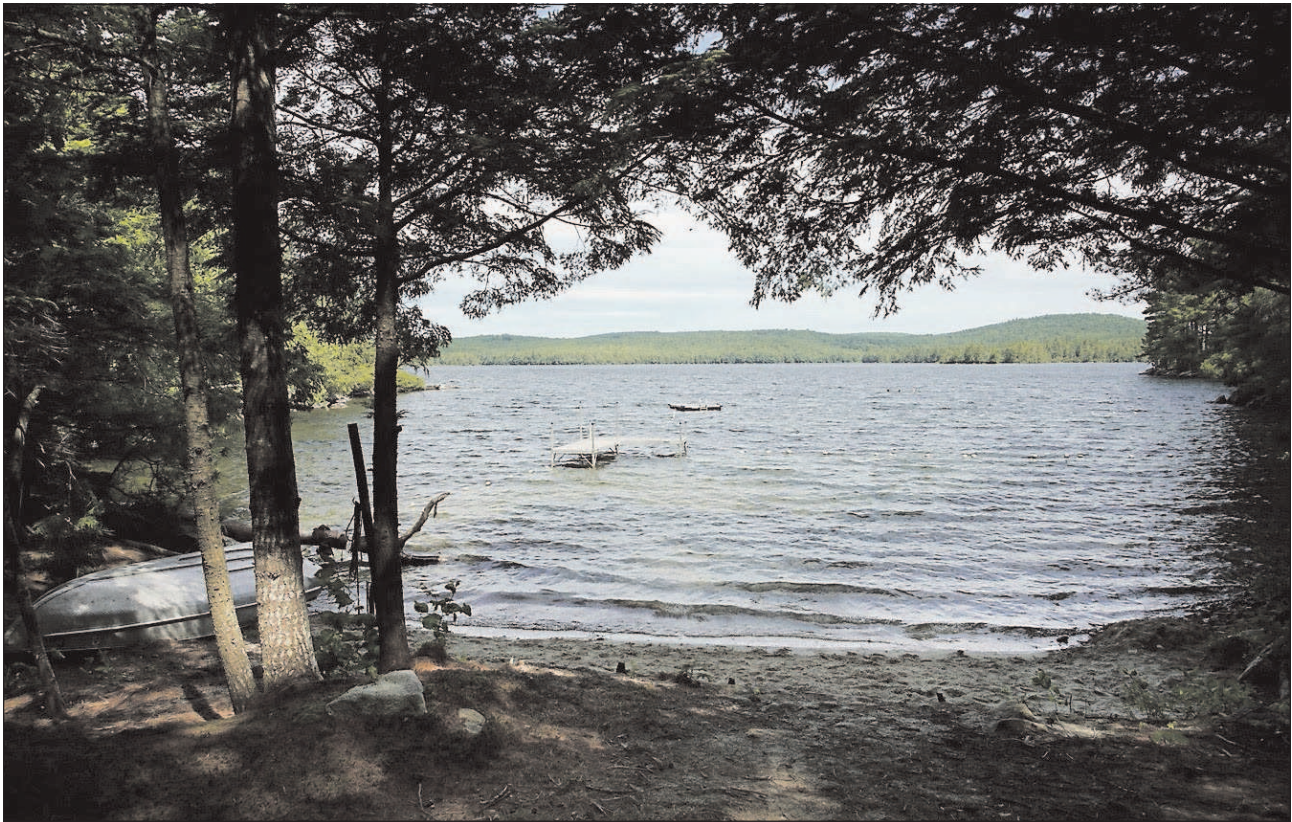
As she spoke, Miller pointed to structural changes made this spring to the lodge, the oldest of the camp buildings, dating to at least 1880, and the oldest structure on Parker Pond. There is a new roof on the porch, new paint and glaze on the windows and frames, and new sills underneath. "And it's all in a straight line. Reg would be very proud," Miller said.

The camp is something of a time capsule, harkening to an era before Grauert purchased it, when the complex was known as the Spruce Point Camps. In many ways, it's similar to other Maine sporting camps up north and in the nearby Belgrade Lakes region. But as with each of those camps, this one has its unique character, drawn from the clarity of the water; the lay of land, and the four-legged, finned and winged creatures that occupy both, as well as the spirit of humans who have spent time here.

In addition to the lodge and a dining hall that doubles as the performance space, there are 10 sleeping cabins along the camp's half-mile of shoreline, connected by meandering dirt paths. Some of the gabled cabins are situated just 20 feet from the shore; others are 50 feet from the water. They all have working toilets, showers and electricity, but all are rustic, built without foundations and supported by wooden posts and stones, with exposed stud walls and rafters. All have screened-in porches, with rocking chairs, and wood stoves, though they're not used anymore because of the fire danger. Loons are ever present.

The camp property occupies about 65 wooded acres, most of which are covered by an easement held by the Kennebec Land Trust, which maintains public trails throughout the property. The camp itself, because of its historic status as a classic Maine sporting camp, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2006. It was established in 1915 as Stevens Camps, named for a local man who purchased 12 acres and the lone building. In 1922, it was renamed Spruce Point Camps, with most of the sleeping cabins added around that time. Ownership changed over the years, and electricity was added, but the camp ceased operation around 1940.

When Grauert and Reid arrived from New York at the end of World War II, they were eager buyers, committed to creating a camp with an emphasis on the creative arts and natural sciences as an alternative to the traditional Maine sporting camp. From the beginning, Grauert and Reid linked arts-related activities to environmental responsibility. They believed in the resonance of place, and the camp's unspoiled environment offered an ideal setting to encourage artistic expression of all kinds and creativity in general. The name Bearnstow is said



Photos by Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer

TOP: The beach area of Bearnstow Camp, which is on Parker Pond in Mount Vernon. ABOVE LEFT: Bebe Miller turns on a light in the arts cabin at Bearnstow camp. ABOVE: Molly Hess starts a fire for day campers to roast hot dogs at Bearnstow.

“It's been all dance, because that was Reg's world. But we need to diversify the programming. We need to reach more people.”

LAURA FAURE
Bearnstow board member

to reach more people," Faure said. "No one knows about this place. We want to change that."

The camp operates on a relative shoestring. This year's budget is \$120,000, which reflects minimal programming and ongoing maintenance.

Over time, the camp became a money-losing enterprise. Faure said. "Reg has always been very generous, and she wanted people here. She had eight interns every summer and ran workshops whether they had enough people or not," she said. "She just wanted people here, and she wanted to be around artists."

With only a small endowment, the board needs to change the financial equation so the camp survives. Faure envisions the camp could be used as a retreat for visual artists, writers and musicians, as well for people and organizations interested in ecology and the environment. In the realm of historic summer art retreats in Maine, Bearnstow is similar in some ways to both the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, which also was established in 1946, and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, which shares a remote waterfront setting uniquely suited to immersive creativity in a quiet community. But unlike Skowhegan, Haystack or the Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, Bearn-

stow lacks an international reputation or much recognition beyond its web of alumni and supporters.

Faure wants to change that. "It needs to be better known," she said.

But first she and her colleagues must raise some money. Their goal is to raise \$120,000 for a three-year restoration effort, involving upgrading the cabins to make them more hospitable for adults, with better showers, more comfortable beds and brighter lights so people can read at night, along with other deferred maintenance. They just installed a commercial grade dishwasher, for example, and are on the hunt for a better range. The camp no longer has horses, and there is talk of converting the stables into open-air art studios.

"There is a lot of energy and a lot of ideas," Faure said.

They're about halfway there, with \$55,000 in the bank at the end of June and grant applications pending. Over and above the maintenance, this fall they will try to raise another \$40,000 for a new multi-use arts building that might be built in three or four years.

"We have another year or two of just restoration. But over this winter, we will start to dig into the programming conversation again. We have to move forward, so I want to reach out to as many people in the visual art commu-

nity, the literature community, ecology, environment science. The fundraising is easy. It's straightforward – you have got to fix the toilets. But figuring out sustainable programming is really hard."

Molly Hess, Bearnstow's associate director, who is also a dancer and choreographer, described the camp as a place "where almost anything seems possible." She arrived 11 years ago as an intern and quickly became day camp director. Grauert gave her more responsibilities with time, and with Grauert's death, Hess is now in charge of day-to-day operations.

The camp is whatever the people who are there at the moment make it, said Hess, who lives in western Massachusetts when not living on Parker Pond. Nature, ecology, science, dance and theater are always present, and summer interns who lead the day camp are expected to teach campers their specialty. That might be kick-boxing, salsa dancing or circus arts. Hess arranges tree-identification talks with foresters and discussions with biologists about aquatic macroinvertebrates or animal camouflage techniques.

This year, there are two, two-week sessions of day camps for kids, with 15 campers each. There are also two, one-week adult workshops and a week for alumni.

Campers swim in the lake and hike the trails, and they all eat their meals around a series of tables in a screened-in porch just a few feet from the lake. When Grauert ran the camp, she sat the at the head table and told stories – about how she and Reid discovered the camp, how they salvaged Guy Lombardo's peg-leg gold piano from a storage house in Augusta, or the first time she met Alwin Nikolais.

"She had an arsenal of stories, but she was so good at telling them, I never got tired of hearing them," Hess said.

With the storyteller missing from the the head of the table, change hangs in the air; as inevitable the sunset, and no one knows what that means or what it might look like. But they also don't seem too worried.

The charm of the camp also ensures it can't change very much. There are only 33 beds, and the easement limits growth. The key is figuring out how to make use of those beds going forward so the camp survives without the generosity of its founder.

Miller is philosophical. "I am not afraid of change, because it will change," she said. "When you introduce new elements, you don't know where it will take us. We can't control it – that is what going forward is. But we can guide it. We know what is important to us. So the question is, how will that resonate with others and will it become clear enough that others understand it, too?"

She is confident they will, once they settle in, eat a meal and listen to the loons.

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Photo by Kat Moraros

Elliot Nye, Robbie Harrison and Michela Micalizio in "The Comedy of Errors" at Deering Oaks park in Portland.

THEATER

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roles in "The Comedy of Errors," a play overflowing with confusion and misunderstandings as characters reconnect after years apart. Director Hannah Cordes has gone for the broad comedy in a trimmed down, 90-minute production of the play that seems, at first glance, almost fully committed to over-the-top, clownish humor. But thank heavens, the clever wordplay by the Bard, as squeezed into this high-energy production, brings things to another level.

It's a production tailor-made for the park setting where plays must compete with distractions from any number of natural and manmade sources. When the lines occasionally

get swallowed up in ambient noise, mimed passages and sight gags are still there to please. The performance space expands from the bandshell stage around and into the audience to bring a sense of up-close involvement for the folks seated on blankets or in lawn chairs.

The fact that the twin characters have the same names exponentially complicates the plot. Antipholus of Syracuse arrives in Ephesus with his servant Dromio of Syracuse. They encounter Antipholus of Ephesus whose servant is Dromio of Ephesus. Wives, lovers, merchants, royals and various others all get into the fray as identities and intentions are constantly being confused.

Robbie Harrison takes on the roles of the two Antipholuses while Michela Micalizio embodies the two Dromios, each switch-

ing hats, vestments and attitudes between scenes to differentiate who they are playing at the moment.

Harrison has both his characters emotionally come apart at the seams as they repeatedly order the "wrong" Dromio to complete an important task only to later suffer incredulity from the "right" one. Romantic entanglements likewise go askew as Adriana, wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, tangles with his twin, who becomes enamored of her sister Luciana in the growing disorder.

Micalizio, as in previous productions for Fenix and elsewhere, is a ball of energy. Here, in largely matching roles, she's exceptional as one of Shakespeare's trademark silly but insightful underlings. Each attached to a blundering and often blubbering master, her Dromios are a delight in a

highly kinetic and charismatic performance.

Kat Moraros, who knows her way around effectively projecting a Shakespearian role, is first rate as the put-upon Adriana. Hollie Pryor, as her sister and in one other brief role, likewise works her laugh lines well, adding welcome touches of subtlety to this whirlwind production.

Elliot Nye rounds out the cast in a handful of roles, delivering punchlines and moments of caricature, capturing the light and loose spirit of the show.

Deeper ideas about identity in changing times may be audience afterthoughts about a production that happily brings the Fenix Theatre Company back to its first home in the park.

Steve Feeney is a freelance writer who lives in Portland.